

# PART ONE

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**I**n this section you will explore the art (the "how") and the science (the "what") of counseling. Other purposes of this section are (a) to explain the term *counseling* by offering several definitions, (b) to propose a definition of counseling parents of exceptional children, (c) to identify and discuss the counseling process and four approaches, and (d) to analyze issues that impact on the helping relationship. Throughout this section I want to encourage you to arrive at your own conclusions about the skills needed by effective helpers. Concern, caring, compassion, even good intentions are not sufficient for helping most parents of exceptional children. After studying this section, I hope you will realize that effective counselors must have an array of skills and attitudes that extend beyond a willingness and genuine desire to help others.

# 2

## Overview of Counseling

*After mastering the material in this chapter, you should be able to*

1. Compare and contrast definitions of counseling.
2. Understand the essential differences between *counseling* and *giving advice*.
3. Discuss counseling philosophically, considering both the client's and counselor's search for values.
4. Discuss the kinds of people that should counsel parents of exceptional children as well as the methods they should use.
5. Define the process and differentiate among the distinguishing characteristics of counseling parents of exceptional children.

*If you are to make a difference in your helping relationships with others, it means helping others to change their lives in such a way as to make the consequence of their living more satisfying.*

—Harold Hackney and Sherilyn Nye

*The meaning of life is something that each person must define for himself, and the way a person gives meaning to life will profoundly affect the way in which he lives it.*

—Verda Heisler

**T**his chapter begins with a fundamental question: What is counseling? Since this book is about the counseling process and those who practice it, some definitions of counseling are in order. From a historical perspective, counseling was equated with giving advice, and this idea is still prevalent, causing conflict and confusion when educational and noneducational counselors view their function as more than parceling out advice. Further confusion arises when those in search of help are offered assistance by many types of persons who call themselves counselors such as geriatric counselors, financial counselors, mental health counselors, employment counselors, vocational counselors, etc.

### WHAT IS COUNSELING?

Counseling has become a catch-all term meaning a variety of practices including encouragement, the giving of advice and information, testing and test interpretation, and even the highly sophisticated and technical practice of psychoanalysis. Some representative definitions of counseling reflect many of the subtle differences that have evolved over the years as well as illustrate that the definition of counseling is not universally agreed upon. According to various authorities, counseling may be defined as

- ☐ a structured, permissive relationship allowing the client to gain self-understanding that leads to taking positive steps toward the new orientation (Rogers, 1942).
- ☐ a process that takes place in a one-to-one relationship between a troubled individual and a professional whose training and experience may be used to help others reach personal solutions (Smith, 1955).
- ☐ that interaction which (a) occurs between two individuals called a counselor and client, (b) takes place in a professional setting, and (c) is initiated and maintained to facilitate changes in the client's behavior (Pepinsky & Pepinsky, 1954).

- helping an individual become aware of personal reactions to the behavioral influences of the environment, and helping the individual establish some meaning for this behavior. Counseling also helps the client to develop and clarify a set of goals and values for further behavior (Blocker, 1966).
- a process by which a troubled person (the client) is helped to feel and behave in a more personally satisfying manner through interaction with an uninvolved person (the counselor). The counselor provides information and reactions that stimulate the client to develop behaviors for dealing more effectively with oneself and the environment (Lewis, 1970).
- attempting to change one's view of oneself, others, or the physical milieu. As a result, one is helped to achieve identity as a person and take steps toward feelings of worth, significance, and responsibility (Bernard & Fullmer, 1977).
- generating alternatives, aiding the client in loosening and breaking old patterns, facilitating the decision-making process, and finding viable solutions to problems (Ivey & Simsek-Downing, 1980).
- empowering the client to cope, to participate in activities that lead to growth, and to make decisions. Counseling helps the counselee to gain control over immediate problems and future possibilities (Patterson & Eisenberg, 1983).

By contrast, Patterson (1967) says counseling is not

1. giving information, though information may be a part of the process.
2. pointing out what the client should do in any given situation.
3. influencing attitudes, beliefs, or behavior by means of persuading, leading, or convincing.
4. influencing behavior by admonishing, warning, threatening, or compelling.
5. interviewing. (Interviewing is involved, but it is not synonymous.)

The nature of counseling is often philosophical. Advocating a developmental approach, Mathewson (1962) contends that the counselor has the responsibility to help the counselee discover values to live by, and then to choose and act accordingly. Curran (1960) also sees the counseling process as a search for values. The counselor's goal, according to Curran, should be to assist the client in searching, then to allow the client to make goal choices. On a personal level, this means seeking the answers to three fundamental questions: Who am I? Where am I going? Why am I going there? Coleman (1969) says that these questions deal with one's self-concept, one's life plans, and one's value patterns—in essence with the self-knowledge involved in self-direction. In contrast to stressing the client's values, Corey, Corey, and Callanan (1984) discuss the counselor's values and possible conflicts that may arise during counseling sessions. It is, of course, possible that a conflict of values can impair a helping relationship.

The burden must be on counselors to honestly assess whether their values are likely to interfere with the objectivity they need to be useful to their clients. To make such an assessment, counselors must be clear about their feelings con-

cerning value-laden issues, they must be honest about their limitations, and they must be honest with potential clients when they think value conflicts will interfere with the therapeutic relationship. (p. 81)

In bringing together these definitions, counseling may be viewed as human interaction that establishes a unique relationship. According to Munson (1971), the counselor can provide an opportunity for others to examine their feelings, attitudes, values, and beliefs and the manner in which they express them in day-to-day behavior. The helper can provide acceptance, understanding, and trust. The counselor doesn't do these things in a counseling cubicle; instead, the counselor tries to be a genuine person and strives to relate to others in "human" ways.

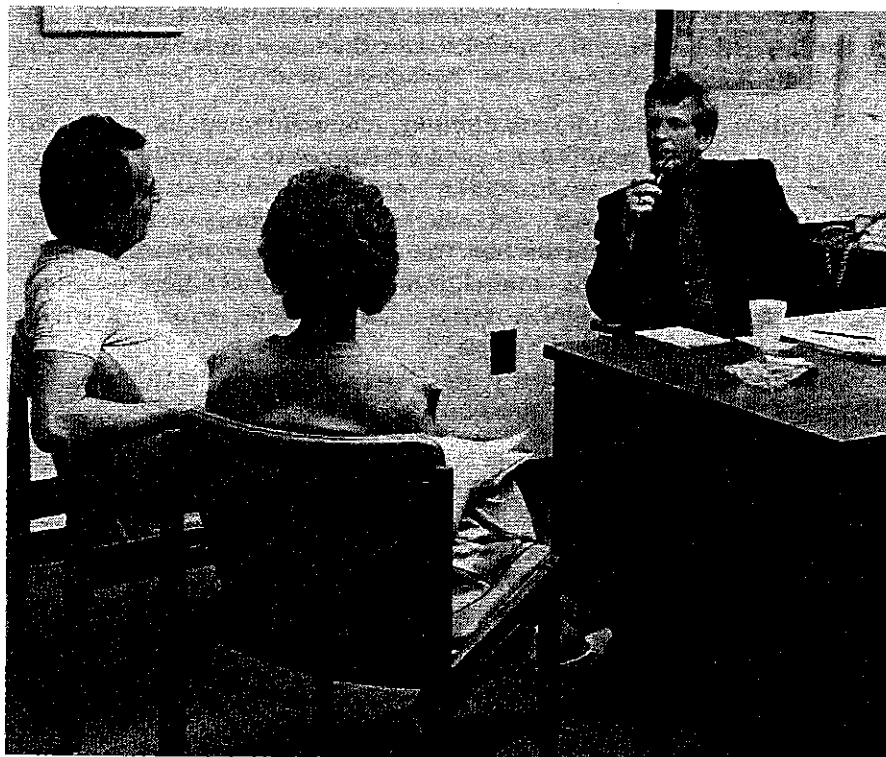
Carl Rogers (1961) has clearly described the helping relationship by suggesting a series of probing questions for the counselor:

- Can I be in some way which will be perceived by the other person as trustworthy, as dependable, or consistent in some deep sense?
- Can I be expressive enough as a person that what I am will be communicated unambiguously?
- Can I let myself experience positive attitudes toward this other person—attitudes of warmth, caring, liking, interest, respect?
- Can I be strong enough as a person to be separate from the other?
- Am I secure enough within myself to permit him his separateness?
- Can I let myself enter fully into the world of his feelings and personal meaning and see those as he does?
- Can I receive him as he is? Can I communicate this attitude?
- Can I act with sufficient sensitivity in the relationship that my behavior will not be perceived as a threat?
- Can I free him from the threat of external evaluation?
- Can I meet this other person who is in the process of becoming, or will I be bound by his past and by my past? (pp. 50–55)

The term *counseling* is difficult to define with exactness and precision—it can and does vary from one person to another. For example, what does the word mean to you? What is significant, however, is that counseling consists of a relationship between a helper and a client (or parent) where necessary skills or attitudes are used to resolve their unique problems or concerns.

### A Helping Activity

Counseling is considered one of the helping professions along with social work, psychiatry and psychology (both clinical and school). Since this book is intended for the varied personnel who work with parents of exceptional children, we need to define who the helpers are. In his article "Who Can Be a Helper?" Brammer (1977) noted that two opposing views surround counseling. One view emphasizes helping as a specialized enterprise based



*A counselor must be gentle, thoughtful, and considerate, but still firm and knowledgeable.*

on a firm foundation in behavioral and medical science. The other view sees helping as a broad human function using helping skills possessed by most of the population.

This text favors the second view, which Brammer also advocates, that in the context of a helping relationship, effective counseling of parents of exceptional children can be conducted by minimally trained people. A particular word of caution is necessary, however. Demos and Grant (1973) define counseling as a one-to-one, face-to-face relationship between an individual who is seeking help and another who is professionally trained to give this help. To meet the criterion of "professional," the person should have a graduate degree or its equivalent and be in an occupation that helps people become better human beings. The final criterion of a professional is that the practitioner must adhere to a code of ethics. Demos and Grant conclude that an individual does not have to be called a "counselor" to be qualified to counsel, but the person must be a professional limiting his counseling to the scope of professional competency. Recognition of competency is important because in assisting parents of exceptional children,

the helper must always be aware of personal strengths and limitations, never attempting to do more than means, capability, and level of expertise allow. Norton (1976) adds that the counselor must be gentle, thoughtful, and considerate, but still firm and knowledgeable about how to assist parents. Sufficient knowledge and experience are fixed and unequivocal criteria. Throughout the remainder of this text, then, all references to counseling and helping will affirm the idea of a person with specialized knowledge of the parent's concern helping within his or her realm of competency.

Because they are closely related, *counseling* and *helping* are used synonymously throughout this text. If a professional listens to parents, making constructive suggestions or offering reassurance, this constitutes a helping relationship. For example, Bassin and Kreeb (1978) give some characteristics of parents with newborn or recently diagnosed retarded children:

1. Parents are looking for answers.
2. They are generally uninformed about mental retardation.
3. Many are receiving ill-timed or poor advice from many people.
4. They are unaware of community programs and services that may be available to them.
5. They may be feeling guilt, depression, or anxiety.
6. Parents often feel isolated and alone—as if they were the only family with a retarded child.
7. They want to talk.
8. They need someone to listen.

When we analyze this list of parental needs and concerns, it seems that a knowledgeable helper could provide the urgently needed support and assistance to these parents. The helper or counselor could serve as a sounding board for parents who want to talk; this would make the parents able to interact more easily, effectively, productively, and lovingly with their retarded child. Demos and Grant (1973) say essentially the same thing when they observe that helping is the core, the foundation, and the essence of counseling.

### **4 Proposed Definition**

As we've discovered, *helping* is a difficult word to define because of its different meanings for different people. A definition of counseling parents of exceptional children is appropriate, however, to establish the working boundaries and focal points of counseling. Being aware of these facets of helping is important before even beginning a helping relationship. Here is a proposed definition:

Counseling is a helping relationship between a knowledgeable professional and the parents of an exceptional child who are working toward a better understanding of their unique concerns, problems, or feelings. Counseling is a learn-

ing process that focuses on the personal growth of the parents, who learn to acquire, develop, and utilize the necessary skills and attitudes for resolving their problem or concern. Parents are helped in becoming fully functioning individuals who assist their child and value a well-adjusted family.

This definition contains several distinguishing characteristics that are either stated or implied: (a) counseling is a helping relationship with a professional who possesses certain skills and competencies, (b) the counselor attempts to aid the parents in identifying and understanding their problem, (c) learning, or a change in behavior, is necessary to bring about a satisfactory solution, (d) acquiring, developing, and utilizing appropriate coping skills can lead to greater self-confidence, (e) the arrival of a handicapped child has an impact on the whole family, (f) while the thrust of helping is working with parents, this does not minimize the needs of the exceptional child's siblings or family—any meaningful way of helping parents should also help the entire family, (g) as a term, *fully-functioning* is similar in meaning to what Abraham Maslow (1970) referred to as *self-actualization*, or the manifestation of one's potential. This humanistic outlook implies that parents can exercise their own potential for learning—they are responsible for using their own resources for development and continued growth.

Our primary goal is to help parents of exceptional children make the best use of their ability and potential. Self-actualization is closely related to any helping function, for it is a dynamic process of becoming, of adapting, of growing, and of changing.

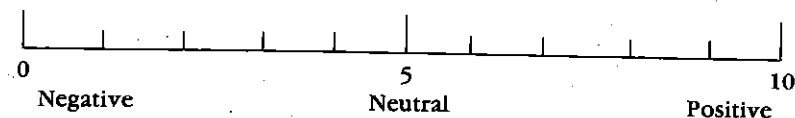
## CHAPTER SUMMARY

Historically, the lack of a precise definition of the role and function of a counselor has caused confusion. Many persons profess to be counselors, and parents of exceptional children are likely to receive counseling services from a diverse group of people with varying educational backgrounds, helping skills, and competencies. The viewpoints of this chapter of what counseling is and is not should assist the reader in identifying the essence of the helping relationship. All helpers must be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and refrain from rendering services beyond their ability or level of competency. The proposed definition of counseling parents of exceptional children can help to identify and focus attention on the counseling aspects so vital to working effectively with these parents.

## ACTIVITIES, EXERCISES, AND IDEAS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Defend or refute the author's proposed definition of counseling parents of exceptional children. What additions or changes would you make? Why?
2. What are some other reasons that make counseling difficult to define?

3. Devise your own definition of counseling. Defend it in terms of purpose, clarity, and expected outcomes.
4. Argue the following statement: A counselor (by definition) serves a unique function and therefore should have formal (professional) training prior to counseling parents of exceptional children.
5. Look back at the series of questions on page 29 that Rogers proposed for the counselor's personal evaluation. On a continuum from 0 to 10, honestly evaluate your feelings as you read each question.



For example, if intense interest in other people usually leads you to do too much for them, and you feel you are not a strong enough person to be separate from another, you might give yourself a 2 on this characteristic.

After you have finished this rating procedure for all ten questions, go back and carefully analyze your responses. If your responses were mostly positive (6 through 10), you possess similar characteristics to those persons who work effectively in the helping relationship according to Rogers.

If some or most of your responses were negative (0 through 4), carefully analyze each question for possible explanations. You might consider such factors as experience, training, the complexity of the helping relationship, or factors relating to your own personality (attitudes, beliefs, values, openness, and acceptance). The counselor alone must decide how to handle the counseling relationship. In this regard, it would be tragic for the counselor to remain ignorant of his or her own value system and personality.

6. Do you agree or disagree that effective counseling can occur even if the helper lacks formal or professional training in counseling or a related field? Do you agree with the definition that helping is teaching people how to help themselves?
7. Is it realistic to believe that a helper can assist clients and parents to become self-actualizing individuals (individuals who reach or achieve their capabilities and potential to the fullest)?
8. Discuss what is meant by "maintaining a firm and abiding faith in the worth and dignity of the individual." As a supplementary activity, read some of the works of Earl C. Kelley, Carl R. Rogers, Abraham H. Maslow, and Arthur W. Combs. How do they define the helping relationship? How does respect for the individual enhance the relationship?

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